

SENATE RECORD VOTE ANALYSIS

105th Congress
2nd Session

Vote No. 294

October 1, 1998, 5:52 p.m.
Page S-11268 Temp. Record

KING COVE HEALTH AND SAFETY ACT/Final Passage

SUBJECT: King Cove Health and Safety Act . . . S. 1092. Final passage, as amended.

ACTION: BILL PASSED, 59-38

SYNOPSIS: As passed, the King Cove Health and Safety Act, will require the Federal Government to give a permanent transportation easement across Federal lands in Alaska in exchange for other lands that will be given to it by the King Cove Corporation (which represents Native Americans). The easement is needed to connect two small communities, King Cove and Cold Bay, in a remote area of Alaska that is accessible only by sea or air. Those communities need to be connected for health and safety reasons. Cold Bay, a community of about 150 residents, supports a world-class airport built during World War II. The airport has the third longest runway in Alaska, it has 24-hour, all-weather capability, and it serves as an emergency alternative for the Anchorage, Alaska airport. When they have medical emergencies, Cold Bay residents are able to fly to cities with hospitals where they can receive medical care. King Cove is predominantly an Alaskan Native community with 703 full-time residents and an additional 400 to 600 seasonal workers. It has only a short gravel runway that is surrounded by steep mountains and deep valleys. Weather conditions frequently make it unusable. King Cove residents can get to Cold Bay by sea, but the weather conditions are often severe and dangerous. Many residents of King Cove have died or suffered severe medical injuries due to air or sea accidents that have occurred when they have tried to get to Cold Bay so they could fly to hospitals. Many residents have also died or suffered severe injuries due to long delays before weather conditions have even permitted attempts to get to Cold Bay. Cold Bay and King Cove can be connected by a roadway. They are only 27 miles apart. Seven miles of that distance crosses Federal wilderness lands. The Federal Government has refused to allow a road to be built across those lands. This bill will make the Federal Government change the designation for a 60-foot strip of land through that wilderness to "refuge" and to allow a one-lane, gravel road to be built (a total of 85 acres would be changed to refuge status). In exchange, the King Cove Corporation will give the Federal Government 580 new wetland acres, which will be designated as wilderness.

Those favoring final passage contended:

(See other side)

YEAS (59)			NAYS (38)			NOT VOTING (3)	
Republicans (51 or 94%)		Democrats (8 or 19%)	Republicans (3 or 6%)		Democrats (35 or 81%)	Republicans (1)	Democrats (2)
Allard	Hutchinson	Akaka	Abraham	Baucus	Kerry	Gregg- ²	Glenn- ²
Ashcroft	Hutchison	Bingaman	Jeffords	Biden	Kohl		Moseley-Braun- ^{2AN}
Bennett	Inhofe	Breaux	Specter	Boxer	Lautenberg		
Bond	Kempthorne	Byrd		Bryan	Leahy		
Brownback	Kyl	Ford		Bumpers	Levin		
Burns	Lott	Hollings		Cleland	Lieberman		
Campbell	Lugar	Inouye		Conrad	Mikulski		
Chafee	Mack	Landrieu		Daschle	Moynihan		
Coats	McCain			Dodd	Murray		
Cochran	McConnell			Dorgan	Reed		
Collins	Murkowski			Durbin	Reid		
Coverdell	Nickles			Feingold	Robb		
Craig	Roberts			Feinstein	Rockefeller		
D'Amato	Roth			Graham	Sarbanes		
DeWine	Santorum			Harkin	Torricelli		
Domenici	Sessions			Johnson	Wellstone		
Enzi	Shelby			Kennedy	Wyden		
Faircloth	Smith, Bob			Kerrey			
Frist	Smith, Gordon						
Gorton	Snowe						
Gramm	Stevens						
Grams	Thomas						
Grassley	Thompson						
Hagel	Thurmond						
Hatch	Warner						
Helms							

EXPLANATION OF ABSENCE:

- 1—Official Business
- 2—Necessarily Absent
- 3—Illness
- 4—Other

SYMBOLS:

- AY—Announced Yea
- AN—Announced Nay
- PY—Paired Yea
- PN—Paired Nay

Alaska is huge. Its coastline alone stretches for 33,000 miles. Most of that coastline, and most of the interior, is vast, wilderness land. The communities that exist are in isolated pockets, with very few roadways connecting them. Most of the roads that exist are small, infrequently traveled gravel strips. One of the few places that has any roads is the area surrounding Cold Bay. That area has some 42 miles of road running into refugee and wilderness areas. Those roads were built during World War II and are commonly used by hunters, bird watchers, and others. Cold Bay also has a huge, all-weather airport with daily flights to large communities that have medical facilities. No road extends to King Cove, however, which is an Alaskan Native community less than 30 miles away. People can only get to King Cove by air or sea, and both modes of transportation are hazardous and often impossible. When the residents of King Cove suffer medical emergencies they frequently are unable to get to Cold Bay so they can fly to cities with hospitals. Since 1981, there have been 11 air crash fatalities involving small, single- and twin-engine aircraft in the air corridor between Cold Bay and King Cove. Numerous other air crashes have occurred as well. The sea route is impassable for much of the year due to ice. Storms often make it impassable for all but very large ships, and the trip, when conditions are favorable, takes nearly 3 hours.

The solution that is favored by the Alaskan Natives and the State of Alaska is to build a road between King Cove and Cold Bay. That road will be just 27 miles. It will be mostly over flat, barren areas, with a few ponds, grass, and no trees. It will not cost the Federal Government one red cent, and in fact will give it a net gain in wilderness because the Alaskan Natives will give it more land for wilderness than it will convert to refugee status. Our colleagues, who have never been to this area, have made three arguments against building the road. First, they have said that they think that the road would usually be impassable due to "snow drifts." We inform them that this area of Alaska has tremendous amounts of rain but very little snow. Second, they have said that the roadway is just a secret plot to get a land route for sending fleets of trucks loaded with fresh salmon to Cold Bay. The mayor of King Cove, though, who himself is a fisherman, says that it is very unlikely that King Cove will be able to compete in the fresh salmon market, due to competitive advantages held by the farmed salmon market. The purpose of having a roadway is much more basic--just having a better chance of staying alive when medical emergencies strike. The third argument our colleagues make is that they do not think the Federal Government should change the status of any wilderness land to allow a road to be built because they do not want to set that precedent. Basically, no matter how persuasive this case is, they are not going to relent because they say other wilderness lands may then be put at risk. We simply disagree with our colleagues. Failing to build this road, beyond any doubt, will cost lives. We do not need to sacrifice human lives in this one pinprick area of land, that already has roads on it, in order to be able to exercise proper stewardship over the millions of acres of wilderness in Alaska and other States. Our colleagues are taking an absolutist, fanatical stand, and if they prevail people will die.

Mariene Newman of King Cove still gets a knot in her stomach when she talks about the three-day wait to get to a hospital after her daughter Arlene, then 5, broke her arm while doing cartwheels six years ago. Fierce winds prevented any planes from using the airstrip. Newman waited and waited for a break in the weather, treating her daughter with painkillers and icepacks. Arlene couldn't keep food down and grew weaker by the day. Finally, Marlene and her husband, A.J., a fisherman who grew up in King Cove, decided to risk the rough seas for the 3-hour boat trip to Cold Bay and its all-weather airport. By the time they reached Cold Bay, the little girl lay limp in her father's arms as she was carried from the lurching vessel, up a 30-foot ladder to the dock and taken by a plane to Anchorage. Arlene was one of the lucky ones--she survived that ordeal, but why should she have had to be subjected to it? King Cove has been fighting for a road for years. We urge our colleagues to put Arlene and others like her ahead of environmental fanaticism. We urge the passage of this bill.

Those opposing final passage contended:

We believe that this bill is just a smoke-screen for a fishing company in Alaska that wants to be able to transport fresh fish across land to an airport that can fly that fish to markets around the world. It is true, as our colleagues say, that the people in King Cove often have problems getting to needed medical care, but that does not mean that this road is the best solution. We have heard from people in Alaska that other alternatives are possible. For instance, better sea transportation could be built, or medical facilities could be put in King Cove, or telemedicine could be improved. Before we set the terrible precedent of allowing land that has been put into wilderness status, which is supposed to be permanent, to be changed to another status, we should make sure that it is absolutely necessary. The case simply has not been made. In fact, there is strong reason to believe that a road may be the worst solution, because it may be impassable for long periods of time due to avalanches or snow drifts. Further studies should be done. We are certain that a solution will be found that will not require the building of a road. We therefore strongly urge the defeat of this bill.